ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	REVIVING THE DEAD ZONE: THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF *AMBIGUOUS GAPS*
	Jennifer Brooke Graham, Master of Fine Arts in Dance, 2018
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After identifying a pattern of creating product-driven work and feeling deeply dissatisfied and limited as a result, dance artist Jen Graham committed herself to releasing habit, following her instincts, and trusting the process of unfolding to find a new creative process and create her Master's thesis work, *ambiguous gaps*. Launching an investigation into the physical relationships between people through an exploration of the intersections of dance improvisation, jazz dance values, and the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System, Graham endeavored to illuminate the physical and metaphoric gaps which must be navigated to create, shift, and maintain connection. This text details her journey through inspiration, research, creation, performance, and reflection.

REVIVING THE DEAD ZONE: THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF *AMBIGUOUS GAPS*

by

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Chapter 1: The Process of Arriving

The Impasse

By the Fall of 2016 I was tired. No, I was exhausted – and disillusioned. I felt as though in my 30 years as a dancer I had spent much of my time putting on the movement of others, taking direction on how I *should* be moving, and patterning my body in a manner governed predominantly by outside influences. Even when I improvised my movement did not feel wholly my own. I had come to realize that in my quest for *knowing myself* – for clarity, efficiency, and virtuosity – not only as a dancer, but as a human being, I had abandoned the unpredictable and raw authenticity of my own voice. Instead, I refined it or shed it, as if the instinctual and wild parts that were uniquely my own were too much of a risk.

As I was standing at the threshold of beginning my Master's thesis work, I wondered how much of my choreography – my thoughts, ideas, and stories – were muddied by this. As I started to examine my work, I realized that even beyond the movement itself, my creative processes were those of others. As cultivation of a skill often occurs, my tools for creation and development had been learned and practiced over time; however, I had never given myself the space or time to adapt them to my own needs and visions. As a result, I constantly felt like I was trying to drive a square peg into a round hole. For years I had attributed this sensation to the ebb and flow of continuity in creating a new work, but that was not what I was experiencing. It was an inability to access myself deeply – my thoughts, my feelings, my intuition, my

movement – in an unfiltered way, and I had yet to find or use the tools that would allow me to do such a thing.

I felt very acutely that much of my life had inadvertently become product-driven – constantly pressing forward according to the best laid plan to achieve the desired end-result. It had become excruciating. Creating new choreographic work felt like erecting a building from the exactitude of a precisely drawn architectural blueprint, trying to anticipate the needs of the workers to complete the job with specificity, as well as the public reaction to the way it would present when it was complete. This pattern included a long history of anticipating the perceptions and reactions of others to most efficiently navigate interactions, communication, and production to achieve a desired outcome – in my professional work as well as my personal life. Most of the time, this way of operating meant personal adaptation in pursuit of creating the path of least resistance.

I was terrified of the possibility of misunderstanding, of not being understood. I was terrified of not thinking through the possible outcomes of a work or an event, only to be hit with an unexpected, potentially negative result or reaction. Not only had this brought me to a creative impasse, but a personal one as well. Relationships in my life were breaking down, and I was helpless to save them. Where I had always taken it on my shoulders to figure out the situation and find a way through, I was realizing that was no longer possible. My inability to simply *be me*, offer what I was able, and let the rest unfold was apparent in every aspect of my life.

Of course, I could not put words to any of this yet. As Laban Movement Analyst and Feldenkrais practitioner Donna Blank reminded me, oftentimes when we are in a

place of newness we do not yet have a language for it, nor should we try to, as words can create a sort of limiting specificity.[1] By saying what something is too soon, it can stifle the possibility for it to become something else – just the very thing I was grappling with.

As naturally happens when things begin to enter your awareness, I started to see the emergence and effects of this well-planned, well-refined, end-result oriented way of working everywhere I looked. As a dance audience member, I had lost my desire to see work. I felt as though what I was craving from dance, the sensorial and emotive *feeling* of unpredictable, dynamic, individual energies of the dancers, I was not finding. Choreographed work, both as a choreographer and an audience member, had lost its spark. I felt I was often witnessing or creating highly intellectualized moving portraits performed by well-trained, well-rehearsed dancers. Everything came to feel so neat, so uniform, so controlled, so sterile. Even unpredictability became predictable. I realized I was experiencing what modern dance pioneer Martha Graham referred to in her autobiography *Blood Memory* as the effect of "start[ing] with the result of dancing rather than the cause,"[2] and I decided it was time to give myself the space to arrive at a new way of working.

[1] On November 9, 2017 Donna Blank guest lectured for Crystal U. Davis' Somatics class at the University of Maryland, College Park. This particular idea was a central theme to her lecture and is paraphrased from recorded notes taken during the lecture. Blank holds a Certification as a Laban Movement Analyst, which will be discussed later in the chapter, and is also a Certified Feldenkrais practitioner. Feldenkrais is a somatic modality, which will be discussed later in the chapter, developed by Moshe Feldenkrais which aims to reorganize connections between the brain and body through mindful movement.

[2] Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 187.

The Research Trail

Prompted by my creative frustrations and a curiosity of how meaning has historically been conveyed to and perceived by audiences in dance performance, I read dance scholar, critic, and anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna's 1983 book *The Performer-Audience Connection: Emotion to Metaphor in Dance and Society*. The work examines eight dance performances in the Washington, D.C. area, across various genres and cultures, analyzing dancer and audience interaction, emotive expression, and audience expectations and responses through interviews of both dancers and audience members. Though the book discusses issues of gender roles, cultural identity, shifting attitudes toward dance throughout history, and possible effective methods for choreographers and performers to reach audiences, of particular interest to me were ideas concerning intentional and unintentional non-verbal communication. While Hanna's text is not the most recent scholarship regarding this subject, it did inspire in me a new trajectory of thought.

On several occasions, Hanna discusses the connection between the movement and experience of the dancing body and its relationship with the pedestrian experience of non-verbal communication and semantics of movement in daily life. She cites an earlier text from 1936, *America Dancing* by America's first major dance critic, John Martin. Martin asserts that it is impossible to separate the human form from its experiences, and therefore no movement can be separate from potential meaning or associations, regardless of other intentions of abstraction or design. From this, I felt compelled to parse my own movement and non-verbal experiences to reexamine ideas and meanings I may associate or conflate, specifically as a dance artist and educator.

Shortly after the opening of this personal inquiry, I began my first semester of classes pursuing my certification as a Movement Analyst in the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System (LBMS)[3] through the Laban Institute of Movement Studies' satellite program at the University of Maryland, College Park. The LBMS work is a method of observing, analyzing, clarifying, and understanding movement based on the theories developed by Rudolf Laban, and further advanced by his student and successor of the work, Irmgard Bartenieff.

The system considers movement through the lens of four Components: Body, Effort, Shape, and Space.[4] Body specifies things such as Posture, Gesture, Body Action, Bartenieff Movement Principles, Developmental Patterns, and Body Connectivity. Effort explicates observable movement intent through action. Shape addresses the body's relationship to itself and the environment. Finally, Space maps the body's inner and outer environments, as well as pathways of movement. Overarching these Components are Themes of Duality, concepts that exist in relation to and simultaneously with each other, including relationships of Macro/Micro, Inner/Outer, Mobile/Stable, Exertion/Recuperation, and Function/Expression. The purpose, then, of delineating these Components and Dualities (which are further broken down and analyzed within the System), is to examine and understand them in relational Pattern and Phrasing as the way in which human beings navigate and make meaning in

[3] Many Laban/Bartenieff scholars are now shifting away from calling the work "Laban Movement Analysis," as it has historically been referenced, in favor of "Laban/Bartenieff Movement System" in order to recognize Irmgard Bartenieff's contributions to the body of knowledge. Additionally, "system" refers to the entirety of the work, which allows for further explication as to how it is being applied; i.e. observation, analysis, somatic practice, etc.

[4] Within the LBMS System, terms specific to the delineation of the work are capitalized for distinction.

the world.[5] The Laban/Bartenieff Movement System is therefore both a method of observation and analysis as well as a practice of finding clarity in intention, action, and perception.

As a part of my training and education towards LBMS Certification, under the tutelage and mentorship of Certified Movement Analysts Karen Studd, Laura Cox, Catherine Maguire, Esther Geiger, and Karen Bradley, I also studied the work through the lens of various texts. The first of which is the book *Everybody is a Body* by Studd and Cox, which serves as an overview of the System, integrating source material from both Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff as well as other contributors to the LBMS body of knowledge. The book provides detailed insight to the Laban/Bartenieff work as it relates to daily life movement experiences, offering a synthesized understanding of the System as a whole.

The second text I read was the biography *Rudolf Laban* by dance educator, scholar, and Laban Movement Analyst Karen Bradley. The work is hailed by fellow dance author, educator, and Movement Analyst Melanie Bales as "Laban's Champion… aptly reflect[ing] in shape and tone the life and work of its subject."[6] The book is a densely packed overview of Rudolf Laban's life and work, including a detailed breakdown of his key ideas, gathered through Bradley's comprehensive research including observation of data, document analysis, and stories from those who knew him. Framed through a micro/macro pattern analysis of Laban's own concepts

[5] Further explanation of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System is beyond the scope of this paper; however, for more detailed information on the subject, refer to text discussed within the following paragraphs.
[6] Melanie Bales, "Laban's Champion," *Dance Chronicle* 33 (2010): 506.

and practices, the work provides clear historical context for the development of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System.[7]

As I continued to immerse myself in the Laban/Bartenieff work, I began examining the writings of Laban and Bartenieff themselves. The first of which was Rudolf Laban's *A Vision of Dynamic Space*, compiled by dance/movement educator and disciple of Laban, Lisa Ullmann. This work dives deeply into his ideas of spatial mapping and movement of the human form, particularly regarding shaping individual perception, and includes Laban's personal drawings and notes. The second book, *Choreutics*, also written by Laban, annotated and edited by Lisa Ullmann, expounds upon these spatial ideas. It explicates what Laban called "Space Harmony" – a concept most succinctly described by Studd and Cox as the relationship of the "changing form of the body in its dynamic expression through space," [8] inclusive of all other bodies and things in that space. The work examines the Part/Whole relationship between the inner energy and outer environment in complex human movement. Finally, I read Irmgard Bartenieff's *Body Movement: Coping with the Environment*, which deeply explores the Laban material through the lens of the Bartenieff Fundamentals – a body of knowledge within the System which Studd and Cox most simply explain as "address[ing] optimizing the supportive relationship between body organization and movement intention" through specified movement sequences based on a series of eleven organizing principles.[9]

[7] Karen K. Bradley, *Rudolf Laban* (New York: Routledge, 2009), xi.
[8] Karen Studd and Laura Cox, *Everybody is a Body* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2013), 149.
[9] Karen Studd and Laura Cox, 135.

Within the LBMS work, and my study of the variety of contexts and perspectives that have shaped it and continue the development of its lineage, I found a necessary and useful tool for my inquiry into non-verbal communication sparked previously by Hanna. With it also grew a great interest in the intention/perception relationship between people and the difference between what one experiences and what one observes.

Amid my Laban/Bartenieff study, I was also reexamining my understanding of jazz dance. In an attempt to fully identify and embrace the influences that ground me as an artist and finding that my long-standing history as a jazz dance student played a critical role, I decided to direct my studies toward the history and lineage of the discipline. Prompted by a conversation with dance scholar and jazz dance expert Melanie George, I began reading *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches* – a collection of chapters written by jazz dance scholars and artists including George, as well as Patricia Cohen, Bob Boross, Sheron Wray, Billy Seigenfeld, Lindsay Guarino, Wendy Oliver, and others, edited by Guarino and Oliver. The book discusses in depth a variety of perspectives regarding the defining principles of jazz dance, its history and development, master teachers/choreographers and their contributions, related forms and styles, teaching perspectives, and contemporary topics within the field.

The comprehensive work opened my eyes to the gaps in my own thirty-year jazz dance education, directed by the fact that my own dance studio jazz training was similar to many in which it offered only specific stylistic experiences with limited historical explanation for the context in which it was situated. As a result, I had carried with me certain influences as a dance artist that were learned through my jazz dance

training, but of which I could not specifically articulate or cite the origin. These influences included many of the social and kinetic values as identified in the chapter by Cohen, finding myself particularly connected to those involving concepts of individuality, improvisation, and relationship. This chart of elements, organized by Cohen, became a means of parsing and identifying my own foundational values as a dance artist.

Social Elements
- Community – the circle
- Individual creativity within the group
- vocal encouragement
- lack of separation between performer and spectator
- friendly challenges among the dancers
- confrontational attitude
- joyousness
- call-and-response
- interaction (conversation) between musicians and dancers

Kinetic Elements
- Use of the flat foot
- bent hip, knee, and ankle joints
- articulated, inclined torso
- body part isolations
- groundedness (earthiness)
- improvisation
- embellishment and elaboration
- Polyrhythms and syncopation
- Polycentrism
- Angularity and asymmetry
- Personal expression and creativity[10]

My influences also included a way of hearing, feeling, and moving with music that is specific to the jazz dance lineage as described by both Wray and Boross. In this tradition, music and dance are embraced as equal partners in conversation. Jazz dancers

[10] Patricia Cohen, "Jazz Dance as a Continuum," in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 6.

respond to the "rhythmic framework [of the music] not by paralleling it but by being in dialogue with it,"[11] creating an interplay which offers "a direct and spontaneous relationship between the music and the personal movement choices of the dancer."[12]

Further, I found that I value what Bill Seigenfeld describes as "time-articulated energy more than space-articulated shape,"[13] which serves as a key element of rhythm-generated jazz. He goes on to say that in this style it is a matter of moving from felt urgency, or what LBMS would describe as Effort Intention, rather than an intended shape of the body or spatial design. In other words, the movement is a result of inner intention rather than imposing outer form.

As I continued to explore and reflect upon the relationship between my values as an artist, my old, new, and developing knowledge of jazz dance, and my progressing LBMS training, my central inquiry kept returning to the dialogue between inner intention (of an action) and outer perception (of the observed action), and how this determines the way people navigate relationship. I became fascinated by the improvisation of this in daily life as well as in dance.

I then participated in several workshops with two of my Laban/Bartenieff teachers, Catherine Maguire and Esther Geiger.[14] The workshops played with

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[11] Sheron Wray, "A Twenty-First-Century Jazz Dance Manifesto," in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay, and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 12.

[12] Bob Boross, "The Family of Jazz Dance," in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 10.

[13] Billy Seigenfeld, "Performing Energy," in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: Univerisity Press of Florida, 2014), 272.

[14] The first of these workshops was held on May 14, 2016 at The Dance Exchange in Tacoma Park, Maryland. It was titled "Inside|Outside: Structured Improvisation – Choreographing While Performing" and was open to the area dance community. Maguire and Geiger then continued to revisit ideas and themes of this work in classes within my LMBS Certification Program through the spring of 2017.

structured improvisation in the lineage of dancer, choreographer, and educator Richard Bull through the lens of LBMS. At the time I knew little of Bull, perhaps only that he created improvisational dance performances through devised structural elements such as mirroring, mimicking, repetition, pathways, and use of negative space. Maguire and Geiger had also trained closely with him for several years. What was interesting to me is that the workshops set up an environment in which I could employ my LBMS knowledge as both participant and witness in the real-time, communal navigation of physical relationships, not only between bodies, but also between bodies and music. These workshop experiences brought my areas of interest and study into focus and allowed me to begin the process of weaving them together.

Over a year later, after the creation and performance of my thesis work in which I utilized many of the structural parameters, experiments, and observations from those workshops as points of inspiration, I finally read dance scholar and choreographer Susan Leigh Foster's book *Dances that Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*. Within this work, which analyzes performances and practices by Bull, Bull attributed the development of his structured improvisations to his training as a jazz pianist and through it, his understanding of jazz musical improvisational structures and their potential application to dance improvisation. I was surprised and pleased to find that many of the practices and creative principles that Bull discovered and utilized are the same that I found through and within my own work due to the overlap I investigated between improvisational structure and jazz dance values,

which ultimately led me to a fascination with the jazz musical improvisation ideas of theme and variation.[15]

Following my introduction to structured improvisation and the exploratory arena that it provided, I became interested in contact improvisation – first reading *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* by improvisational dancer, writer, and teacher, as well as Bull's wife and company co-founder, Cynthia Novack, and then eventually practicing the work myself as well. In *Sharing the Dance*, Novack examines the historical, social, and cultural contexts of contact improvisation, an improvisational form first conceived by Steve Paxton in which two dancers explore movement potential through touch, weight sharing, and the kinesthetic sensing of changing points of contact. Novack discusses contact improvisation as an "art-sport", echoing my experience in the structured improvisation workshops, where the form offers both a communal movement experience as well as an example of movement behavior.[16]

Novack discusses in great length Paxton's desire to find ways of making movement arise naturally from the dancers with which he worked rather than to derive it from an aesthetic or codified form, and how this called forth a need to step away from the "performance" of the work being product or outcome driven, and to embrace the process of its unfolding. In practice, similarly to the foundational elements of rhythm-generated jazz, I found this to be a matter of moving from inner impulse, rather than

[15] For the purposes of this work I did not deeply research jazz musical improvisation or musical theme and variation. Rather, I grasped a superficial understanding of the concepts and used them as points of inspiration, therefore I will not be discussing this in depth as I am not an expert in these areas.
[16] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 8.

outer form. Novack refers to this way of working within contact improvisation as "communal experimentation," which blurs the line between art and life.[17]

I also began reading *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* by dance scholar Danielle Goldman. Goldman's work draws on her own archival research of improvisation across various dance forms, and within it she asserts that improvised dance is not a freedom from form or constraints, but rather an active exercise of freedom through choice making in navigation of various contexts. In agreement with Novack, Goldman discusses the practice of process as a "full-bodied critical engagement with the world,"[18] relating it to the negotiation of constraints within daily life.

With this increasing focus on improvisation, both in personal practice as well as being in the early stages of my thesis creation, I chose to return to a text which I had read twice several years previously. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* by improvisational violinist, computer artist, and educator Stephen Nachmanovitch had been a source of great inspiration for me as a young dance artist. The book, which dives into sourcing and channeling creativity through improvisational play in a multitude of creative mediums, newly provided me a macro lens through which to view and connect my research and investigation to this point. Though Nachmanovitch does explore detail, his text synthesizes over-arching principles, connecting the use of training, technique, and constraints with intuition in order to manifest both life and art in unanticipated ways from a point of personal inspiration.

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[17] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 64.
[18] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 5.

Feeling steeped in improvisation and LBMS Analysis, as well as exercising and exploring my jazz dance influences and their implications across my work, I realized I needed to engage in a deeper connection with myself. Beginning by reinstituting a daily movement practice based in Bartenieff Fundamentals, I also began investigating other somatic work and its application to creative process and performance. The term "somatic" or "somatic practice" refers to movement study, bodywork, and types of therapy that increase physical function and body-mind connection through physical awareness, perception, and experience. As such, I began reading *Dance and Somatics: Mind-Body Principles of Teaching and Performance* by choreographer, performer, and Certified Movement Analyst Julie A. Brodie and kinesiology professor and Certified Movement Analyst Elin E. Lobel, as well as *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* by dance artist, author, and educator Andrea Olsen with contributions by somatic movement therapist Caryn McHose.

Dance and Somatics introduces and explores fundamental somatic principles across a variety of modalities that are central to dance training and performance. The work dives deeply into breath, sensory and perceptive systems, connectivity to self and environment, and pedagogy. Supplementary to this, *The Place of Dance* brings principles of varying somatic practices into the process of creation, offering readings and experiential activities exploring movement initiation, dynamic, training, improvising, choreographing, rehearsing, collaborating, production elements, performance, and daily living. The two texts provided various perspectives through which to approach my own mind-body connection, as well as the material I was exploring within my thesis work.

Beyond my research as a dance artist, my curiosity regarding intention, perception, and relationship extended into my private life as well. I began reading therapist and New York Times best-selling author Harville Hendrix's book *Getting the Love You Want.* Though the aim of the book is to use Hendrix's Imago Therapy technique to help couples achieve more supportive and satisfying relationships by identifying and addressing unconscious associations and images that individuals project onto their partners, I found myself drawn to the concepts of connection and disconnection illustrated within the work.

Hendrix discusses the idea that all things are connected, in constant relationship, similar to Laban's theory of Space Harmony, and that a feeling of disconnect is a rupture of awareness because true severing of connection is impossible. Hendrix also goes on to discuss the concept of creating space in relationship, referencing philosopher and Nobel Prize Winner Martin Buber's distinction of the *I-Thou* relationship. In this the hyphen is both a link and a space-holder, creating distinction as well as connection between the two individuals. This philosophical and psychological representation of relational perception and negotiation offered yet another perspective of investigation for my work.

Embodiment

Considering that the purpose of my research path was to expand and deepen my physical and creative possibilities, I continually explored and synthesized the textual and theoretical information that I gathered through embodied play and practice. Within my Laban/Bartenieff Certification Program I regularly participated in movement

classes focused through various lenses of the material. While moving inside of group improvisations in these classes, organized through individual pulses and spatial design structures which Laban termed "Movement Choirs," I found an awakening of personal choice that I had never experienced before. As Movement Choirs support the choices of the individual with an awareness of the group, thereby giving rise to the dynamic of the whole rather than prioritizing the group to determine the choices of the individual, I found freedom from feeling responsible for group direction and empowerment to fulfill my own needs and wants. I allowed myself more and more as time went on to explore my own inner impulses and eventually became aware of the relational shifts that those impulses created between myself and others, the affect that proximity had on my sensorial perspective and choice making, and spatial tensions that gave rise to interaction.

This new sensation of space, of interactive tensions and the ability to create and offer or constrict and confine, brought me to a new awareness and experience of the physical shape that bodies create when navigating environment and connection. Within LBMS, Shape is thought to be the link between Body (Self) and Space (Other). Body Shape can be static and isolated, it can bridge, it can carve, or it can mold and shift to adapt and accommodate. Whereas previously I had always thought of and experienced the shape of a body as something observable, something outwardly clear and definite, and so something often imposed from the outside, I began to experience Shape as the result of my inner attitude. This was a revelation – the embodied experience that without *trying* my inner intentions resulted in outer expression, that my form followed

my function, and that I could release the need to fulfill an outward expectation and embrace what was inwardly me.

This theme of shedding imposed structure emerged within my exploration of jazz dance as well. Both in my teaching and personal studio play, I dug more deeply into the values that ground jazz dance in its origin and lineage. With this, I began to release the Ballet technique that had grown to be a part of my own approach to jazz dance as well as many jazz dance styles beginning in the mid-twentieth century. Realizing that this technical structure had previously become my primary focus of this work, I made the conscious choice to abandon it and see what would result if I simply embraced the social and kinetic values of jazz dance outlined by Cohen. Interestingly, the same movements and "skills" came out of my body in both choreography and improvisation as they had previously; however, the *way* I embodied and experienced them was different, more visceral, more my own.

Inspired by jazz dance's conversational approach to music, I also began exploring this idea in greater depth – in my own improvisation as well as with my students. I played with the differences between moving to, with, or against the music. I likened it to various types of conversations – ones where two people are in total agreement with each other, ones where sometimes the points of view converge and then diverge, ones where two people are in complete disagreement with the each other, and ones where two people are speaking entirely different languages. With my students, we discussed the kinds of choices these scenarios created, and the internal reactions and responses they elicited. Personally, I used my practice to find the nuanced gradation of

difference in these ideas and how it allowed music to offer structural possibilities for dance improvisation.

Regarding structured improvisation, perhaps the most profound idea was offered within the first exercise of my workshop with Catherine Maguire and Esther Geiger. I was asked to lay on the floor and told to "move only what you need, when you need." The notion struck me as both the simplest and most complex request ever asked of me. Following the workshop, I began exploring this daily. I started using it as a regular exercise in the classes which I taught. I investigated to exhaustion what the idea of need, offering what is needed, and following need could mean or evoke in terms of movement and expression, both individually and within a group.

Out of necessity, the idea of following need also emerged in my personal Bartenieff Fundamentals movement practice. Using the practice as my daily preparation and a means of connecting mind to body, I realized that my practice had to adapt to my particular needs each day. I could not approach myself every day in the same way, as I was different each day, my body was different, everything *felt* different, and so my practice shifted. I began taking inventory of myself mentally and physically and then following what was needed during the course of my practice. I embraced stillness, listening, softening, and surrendering in order to be deeply present and allow myself the possibility of uncovering sensations, needs, and connections that I did not know were there. I then followed these needs through to resolve or satisfaction.

This presence was also learned and reinforced during my regular participation in contact improvisation jams. In these jams I found myself flying and falling, pulling and pushing, airborne and foundational, and by the nature of the work with little to no

predetermination or anticipation, but allowing each moment to give way to the next. This demanded me to be present in both sensing and choice making. I found that if I tried to anticipate and *make* something happen then I could not offer myself to the moment by moment commitment needed to get my partner and I to the places where we ended up, and if I lingered in thought on a previous moment then I was not sensing the possibilities for the next opportunity. This awakened in me a patience with the moment, to see where it may lead, as well as a patience in myself and a patience with my partner.

Between my extensive review of literature and my embodied research I found that these bodies of knowledge and what they inspired were synthesizing very quickly within me. This embodiment and physical experience became the foundation and starting point of exploration within my thesis work. They sent me on a path of deeper investigation and weaving of thematic interests, culminating in the creation of *ambiguous gaps.*

Inspiring Direction

In *Sharing the Dance,* Novack said something that struck me very deeply - "The moment of formation of a new sect may be its most lively, truly different moment, after which the forces of institutionalization begin to exercise constraint."[19] I read it over several times, and several times again. Just as Donna Blank had, Novack put words to

[19] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 16.

the very thing that I was in search of – that wildly spontaneous, brilliantly ephemeral moment when a connection is first made, before we can language it, name it, classify it, and file it away. When it still has the potential to go anywhere and become anything because we are not quite sure what it is yet and we have not had the time to formulate a plan. Whether speaking of two people at first meeting on the street or dancers finding the next moment of movement on stage, it is the same – embracing the precarious nature of the uncertainty of the moment.

I began to understand that this uncertainty is our reality. The reality that I had been fighting against in my creative process, and in my relationships and interactions with others. As a part of the typical tradition of dance students, I would analyze, refine, anticipate, and rehearse. I would break things down and put them back together again to be able to find them and use them at my command in a predictable and reliable manner, achieving the desired outcome of the plan or choreography that had so meticulously been developed. It is for this reason that I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with my work as a choreographer, and dance performance in general – something about it all had become too unrealistic, too far removed from the unpredictable nature of our world and the human response to it, too institutionalized, too controlled. More than anything, I wanted to create work where dancers were having a *real* moment by moment experience. I craved spontaneous connections, unexpected disconnections, demands of extremity, momentary decisions of necessary stillness, and authentic human reaction to and within all of it.

It suddenly struck me that every time I got used to something, each time I reached the point of being able to know it, name it, and rely on it as such, whenever

anything became “normal”, I had hit a detrimental threshold of losing the appropriate degree of sensitivity and reaction to it. The newness was gone. The experience was dulled. I would move onto the next thing, oftentimes believing that I knew all I needed about the previous, instead of continually reinvesting in the process of discovery each time I met it. Applying this to choreography – where movements are set in a specific sequence, the sequence is learned, committed to memory, rehearsed, refined, and then left to some degree to move onto the next sequence – every time it is performed there is a choice as to whether it is *recalled* or *re-found* through a *new process* of discovery in those present moments. It was with this realization that I excitedly embraced the pursuit of putting *process* on stage.

Minding the Gap

Not yet able to fully organize my ideas, feelings, struggles, and research, I carried them with me like an intuitive compass as I stepped into the early stages of creating of my Master’s thesis work, *ambiguous gaps*. I admittedly knew very little of *what* I was about to create and only slightly more of *how* I was going to create it. I set out not to develop a work which *reflected* my experience and research, but rather was *inspired* by it, and so I committed myself to releasing habit, following my instincts, and trusting in the process as it unfolded.

Early on, I knew that the creation and performance of this work would be far more of an investigation than anything else. Despite the proposal process for the work requiring me to paint a picture of what the final piece might look like, I divorced myself

from trying to envision what my pursuit might become. Instead, I tried to hone in on the core of my investigation, initially describing it as a fascination with the way people perceive and navigate self and other. Ultimately though, the work became an investigation into the physical relationships between people through an exploration of the intersections of dance improvisation, jazz dance values, and the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System. I endeavored to illuminate the physical and metaphoric gaps which must be navigated to create, shift, and maintain connection.

I entertained questions like – How is inner concept of self reflected in embodiment of self? How does inner concept affect navigation of outer environment and interaction? How does that feedback loop then affect inner concept? My curiosities regarding what is experienced versus what is observed, as well as the tension between inner intention, outer perception, and how this determines the way people navigate relationship were at the forefront. However, the actual *thing* that I wanted to get to was the space between all of these nameable parts – it was some indescribable gap between what I could intuitively understand and what I could verbalize. Stephen Nachmanovitch describes this gap as the "zone of the unknown," describing our navigation of it as "the most frustrating, agonizing part of creative work."[20] It was this ambiguous gap, this space which must be navigated in order to connect, this space where I did not yet have words, that was the very thing I needed to investigate.

[20] Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 67.

Chapter 2: Creating the Context of the Work

My concern for creating the space, creating the context in which this performance experience would take place, was to simplify the complexity of scenic, lighting, and sound design elements as much as possible. This meant eliminating any superfluous expressions that were not critical to the character and voice of each element within the space and scope of the work. As explicated by Goldman in *I Want to Be Ready*, "improvised dance involves literally giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape,"[21] and so I wanted to establish the design elements in a manner that offered the opportunity to create and shift that landscape, but without interference of artifice.

Scenic Design

To truly manifest my desire of creating a work in which people react to and navigate moment by moment experiences in an environment that is as close to the unpredictable nature of our world as possible, it was imperative for me to *not* use the performance space to transport the audience and performers into "another world." Instead, the performance space, the Kogod Theatre at The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at The University of Maryland, stayed as true to its raw structure as possible. If I was going to be presenting my work in that space, then I wanted to deal with the reality of the space itself.

[21] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 5.

Except that which was used to enclose the scenic elements of the work which shared the performance bill with *ambiguous gaps,* all masking was removed from the theatre. Booms, lighting mounts, rolling Fresnel[22] lights, and cables stood uncovered around the space. The light board sat on a rolling cart next to the small, industrial-style, lifted platform which was used by the live musician.

It was also imperative for me to create an inclusive and immersive space in which to share this work. I wanted to create the space in a manner that promoted an *experience* rather than a lecture, inclusivity rather than exclusivity, raw honesty rather than polished veneer. In truth, I did not want to create a performance, but a *happening*.[23] As such, I took cues from key elements in contact improvisation performance, including what Novack describes as "tacit inclusion of the audience [and] conscious informality of presentation, modeled on a practice or jam,"[24] making an effort to minimize boundaries between performer and audience, and approaching the space (as well as the work) as rehearsal-like as possible.

I set the space in the round, with chairs from floor level to three tiers up the risers, offering the audience the ability to view the work from as many perspectives as the parameters of the space would allow as well as choice in their proximity to the

[22] A Fresnel light is a common theatrical light which produces a wide, soft-edged beam of light, and is commonly used for back light and top light. The particular Fresnel lights used for *ambiguous gaps* were free-standing with adjustable height and mounted on rolling wheels. Also referred to as simply "Fresnels."

[23] The term "happening" began being used in the 1960's to describe art or art related performances, events, or situations. Happenings can occur anywhere, are often multi-disciplinary, and have nonlinear narratives, sometimes including audience participation, improvisation, and an effort to dissolve the boundary between artwork and viewer.

[24] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 122.

performers, as the floor level seating was inside of the movement space. The chairs and risers were industrial-style and simple, like that which were used by the musician. The floor was covered in its entirety in grey marley so as not to define a formal stage space or distinguish between "stage" and "audience". Everything about the scenic design of the theatre was to promote a dissolution of the fourth wall between performer and audience.

Performer Casting

Initially, I envisioned a cast of six to eight dancers of varying backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and movement styles, accompanied by a single musician playing a variety of instruments. Though the musician's involvement remained as originally planned, I ended up with five female dancers – Kristin Castaneda, Laurie Dodge, Adrian Gusky, Ciarra Phillip, and myself[25] – diverse in all originally desired aspects except gender.[26] I chose the dancers not based on technical virtuosity, but rather an apparent openness and willingness to jump into unknown territory together and navigate our way through it. Each of the other four dancers and I have very different movement styles, distinct voices with some areas of overlap and similarity, but varying degrees of performance experience and levels of training.[27]

[25]As the dancers became a community investigating a common idea, they will not be referred to by name in the discussion of the development of the work.

[26] I began the creation of the work with six dancers, myself, the other four women, and a man whom I was introduced to through an audition I held. Several months into the rehearsal process the male cast member had to step away from the project. Though I was concerned over how a cast with all female dancers might shift an audience's perception of the work, I quickly realized how little that mattered, as the investigation remained the same and the perception of others is entirely outside of my control. At that point, the decision was easy, and we became a cast of five female dancers.

[27] For the purposes of this paper I will not be revealing the names of the dancers within the cast. I will speak of them generally to protect privacy, unless speaking of myself as a dancer within the work.

I wanted dancers who were representative of a larger cross-section of the world – not just in skin color, cultural background, or body type, but in *the way they moved*. It struck me that rarely in the world are we ever fully equipped and precisely trained to tackle the obstacles and opportunities that we encounter. Following suit, and as Billy Seigenfeld explains is embraced in the jazz dance style of American Rhythm Dancing, I wanted as much as possible to incorporate "the vernacular body because, as with the art of acting, it more readily allows one's common humanity to radiate through a given performance."[28] To take this idea one step further, I added a seventh cast member, lighting designer Christopher Brusberg.

Lighting Design

Christopher Brusberg and I sat down very early in my process to discuss my ideas for this work. Immediately he was on board with everything I wanted to investigate. Our first meeting turned into several brainstorming sessions, each time narrowing the focus and deepening the layers of how we would approach the work. We discussed possibilities of improvised lighting, industrial and found light sources instead of typical theatrical lighting, and dancers manipulating the light sources. We also discussed the idea of the light being another "performer" in the space, capable of being in improvised conversation with the other performers. It became clear very early on

[28] Billy Seigenfeld, "Performing Energy," in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 274-5.

that this particular collaboration would become vital to the development and trajectory of the piece.

As much of the "choreography" of the work was planned to be structured improvisation, Brusberg and I decided the lighting would follow suit. We were both intrigued with this idea of the light being considered a performer, another voice or body in the work. It became a part of the conversation that the light itself would serve as his proxy, as he would be the one perceiving, deciding, and responding within the improvisational conversation, but his medium for expressing those choices would be the light.

Following these discussions, Brusberg came into a few rehearsals and watched as the dancers and I explored movement ideas and experiences. He became fascinated by the standing, wheeled Fresnel lights that were sometimes used to light the studio spaces. As he saw it, the experience we were trying to create in performance was that which he had sitting with us in those rehearsals – informal, raw, and interacting with the physical space and everything within it. With that, he had the idea to light the work by hand using the Fresnels. It was with this decision that Brusberg was added to the cast. No longer would light be his proxy, but he would be improvising his craft within the performance space with the dancers and musician.

Once this decision was made, all others began to fall into place. Together, Brusberg and I created a "toolbox" of wheeled Fresnel lights, theatre house lights, additional scoop lights to accentuate the house lights and show the entirety of the physical space of the theatre including the catwalks, lighting elements, and instruments, all without colored gels manipulating the color of each bulb. This tool box then allowed

us to create improvised lighting structures for each section and transition of the work which dialogued with the movement and musical structures improvised by the other performers.

Music & Sound

It was imperative to the work that music be live performance, taking the role as another voice, or several other voices participating in the improvised structure of the piece. Composer and musician, Troy Everett and I worked together to create improvisational sound scores that allowed him to engage with the other performers on stage, as well as the central investigation of the work.

Originally, Everett and I wanted to try to stay true to the musical influences of jazz music in rhythms, syncopation, and overall sound, as this musical style and ideas of improvisation were a great influence on how I was developing the work. However, we found quickly that this became a limitation on his musical voice, which seemed to be a more arbitrary part of the structure and did not allow him to fully work from his perspective. We then made the decision that the style, instrumentation, and sound would be entirely his choice, based on how he was inspired to engage. As such, he played the piano, the viola, the acoustic guitar, and the electric guitar, all while looping sound, creating synthesized beats, and live mixing on his laptop[29].

[29] In electronically generated or manipulated music a loop is a repeating sound or section of sound material, also referred to as a sample or sampling, and can be blended with live instrumentation and/or other samples to create a mix.

Costume Design

In committing to this idea of design simplicity, costuming became another critical, but necessarily understated element of the work. What began as more heavily styled and stylized garments, with modern cuts, layered draping, and coordinating shoes, became restrained to stylized, refined versions of each performers typical rehearsal wear. In creation, the costume designer, Jeannette Christensen, gathered details from each performer regarding their personality, how they would describe their voice, what they like to wear, and what type of clothing allowed them to fully access all that they needed in the piece. With this, she designed and styled costumes for each performer that reflected their individuality, all within the color palette of blacks, greys, deep greens, and deep blues, which coincidentally was the palette to which each of the performers were drawn.

In retrospect, however, we should have worked to continue to deconstruct the costuming rather than elevate it from rehearsal-wear. This was the one element where we fell short of truly embracing the reality and simplicity of bringing the work out of one space in which we used to rehearse and creating the experience in another space where an audience of witnesses and observers could join. If we had remained committed fully to this in the way of costuming, each of the performers would have perhaps styled themselves in a simple, functional, yet individually expressive manner, the same way they did for each rehearsal. Instead, our final costuming result was a bit muddled and confused, lacking a commitment in either direction of refinement or informality.

Chapter 3: Creating the Content

I decided that I would embrace the fact that *ambiguous gaps* was first and foremost a dance concert. I would not try to make it anything more than just dance and movement exploration by creating a linear narrative or story-line. Instead, I would use the cast and the space to create objective physical scenarios and set-ups to illuminate the gaps in shifting relationships which must be navigated, both individually and as a group.

Though I had a clear vision of my point of investigation, I had to personally transcend my own expectation of narrative and trust that meaning would reveal itself without my driving effort towards it. In this way, I decided to plunge myself so deeply into what I often expect dance that has no story to be in hopes that I find something fundamentally unexpected, revealing that which is deeper inward rather than make an effort at expanding outward.

Fundamental Principles

To begin, I honed a set of fundamental principles – "rules" that I would always return to as a guide when the work, or the focus within it, began to go astray. These principles served both as a map, as well as an over-arching structure for the piece, and were developed out of improvisational and choreographic play during the first several weeks of the rehearsal process. To create them, I began making note of what seemed to "feel right" and fall in line with the simplicity of what I was investigating. I then explained these rules to the cast to help guide them in their decision-making processes within the work. I purposely left them open-ended to allow for personal interpretation

and the ability to shift specificity of meaning as the scope of the work developed. These six rules were:

- remain present moment by moment, navigate the newness
- accept what is happening as it unfolds, and things as they are
- remain honest in action and reaction, do not fabricate
- stay true to the task at hand, embrace the needs of what is functional
- listen to the needs of the moment and the space, if you are not additive or of need, be still
- listen to your inner impulse to make decisions

Beyond these, I had one additional rule for myself which I did not share with the cast, reinforcing the six others:

- do not hold on too tightly, give everything, including yourself, space

This overall presence in self, and in the space, with an acceptance and navigation of things as they happen, allowed me the possibility to be both completely immersed in the work as it developed, as well as maintain an objective distance from it. In moments when I felt compelled to fall into old patterns of planning or controlling because I was afraid that something might not work, the rules pulled me back on course. I was free to make choices and accept the result, whatever it may be, as were the cast members inside of the work – the rules encouraged it, and if something resulted that "broke the rules" it too had to be accepted and allowed to inform the next decision. Though use of these rules was difficult to sustain at first, creating periods of frustration, conflict, and difficulty due to often not being able to foresee the result of a choice, through practice it became second nature and the ultimate diffuser of confusion and distress within rehearsals as well as my shaping of the work.

Conflict, Discovery, & The Rehearsal Process

Early on, I found that the dancers and I were continually confronting preconceived notions and conflicts between inner belief and outer projection of how we valued our own bodies, our capabilities, and dance in general. Due to this, I decided we needed to spend time investigating these tensions before creating material. We spent the first three months of rehearsals playing with movement ideas followed by discussions about our experiences to identify our mental constructs surrounding what we deemed good or bad, right or wrong, successful or unsuccessful, regarding our own physical form and appearance, as well as the intention or objective of the movement idea. I realized that many of these valuations seemed to be a product of each of our dance training, but intuitively I knew that it was imperative we each shed these judgements to move forward with the possibility of new discovery. Of course, our training and technique until that point was a part of us, but we needed to be able to "create through [it] and not with it."[30]

Once I began shifting these movement investigations into more structured improvisational work for the group, it became apparent that the dancers were either focusing in a manner that was entirely internal, with little visual acknowledgement of the space or people around them, or in a way that was entirely external, with little inner sensing of their own physicality. The entirely inner focus minimized the potential for outer relationship, and the entirely outer focus neglected the agency of self within relationship. Recognizing that the dancers would need the ability to easily shift back

[30] Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 21.

and forth between these two manners of focus, while also opening the possibility of being "present" in both areas of focus simultaneously, we began to practice consciously sensing, both inside and outside of ourselves. Using improvisational and choreographed structures I introduced the ideas of witnessing, listening, seeing, and stillness, asking the dancers to only act or react when they sensed an opening for it. This grew into practicing moving in a fully embodied manner and making personal choices while maintaining an open focus of witnessing the others in the space. Adopting the idea of conversation through movement, I equated the witnessing to hearing and processing what someone else is saying and the embodied moving to cultivating and forming your own thoughts to express outwardly. This resulted in a continuous cycling between inner and outer for the dancers, as well as the ability to hold presence in both spaces at once – in the "gap" between. As Olsen describes in *The Place of Dance*, the dancers found a manner of "composing the whole body, orienting toward visual cues with ease and flow, and responding to change."[31]

As I took these improvised structures and pieces of choreography and began to build the work, which includes both choreographed and improvised sections, it became apparent that the dancers were physically approaching the two types of content very differently. Though we found the ability to release aesthetic expectations within improvisation, stylized and codified aesthetic looks were emerging in the choreographed work. My desire was for the dancers to be able to approach choreographed material in the same manner as improvised movement, with choice

[31] Andrea Olsen and Caryn McHose, *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 148.

making in the moment based on the needs of the moment rather than trying to *make* the movement look or come out in a certain way. Though choreographed material does involve a repeatable sequence of movements, it is the nature of live performance that each time the sequence is performed it is slightly, if not drastically, different. To achieve a more improvised approach to the choreography, I asked the dancers to make improvisational choices within the choreographed sections such as changing a facing or a pathway, altering the movement so that the shape or look of it might be different while maintaining the intent, or changing the size or amount of space a movement uses. Introducing these improvisational choices within choreography resulted in a shift away from habit, changing the shared energy and perception of the moment, as well as offering opportunity for something new to emerge out of the whole.

As sections of the work started coming together, another habit began to emerge. The dancers' facial expressions while performing the material often became choreographed. Though I did not dictate their facial expressions, they each began to take on very specific masks of energy within the face and eyes, and sometimes even the whole of the body, that did not look to be experiencing the movement and allowing that sensation to naturally inform expression, but rather seemed arbitrary and forcefully expressing a manufactured feeling. I started calling this "the performance face".

In an online article published by Dance Spirit Magazine discussing the learned facial expressions by young dancers to "enhance [their] routines," several dance teachers, choreographers, and competition judges share their input regarding the use of dancers' faces. Choreographer and judge with the national dance convention and competition West Coast Dance Explosion, geared toward young aspiring dancers,

Eddie Strachan discusses his position that "no matter what type of dance you're doing, you're trying to portray something – a character or an emotion, [and] your expression adds another dimension to the performance." On the other had, a judge for national competitions StarQuest and Applause Talent Competition, as well as director of the young choreographer's workshop Uncovered, Shelly Masenoir says that "facial expressions need to come from a real human place," and dancers have to "find the emotion within the movement."[32] Considering these two perspectives among a multitude of others regarding the use of the face by dancers in the pre-professional competition and convention arena, and recognizing that the dancers in my cast came out of this lineage of training, I began to realize the potential influences on the way they were expressing within my work.

Since my desire was for the dancers to be present in their movement choices and interactions and allow their sensation of that physicality to inform their facial expressions, my task became helping the dancers to recognize when their expressions were coming from other sources. As we investigated this through recording and reviewing our rehearsals, as well as observing and providing feedback for each other, we discovered that "the performance face" came from primarily two sources for this group of dancers. One was as a product of association – associating specific postures and gestures with certain feelings and emotive expressions. The second was a perceived need to *express* as clearly as possible to an audience what a movement *meant*.

Understanding that these two things directly violated our rules for the work, the dancers struggled to release their facial habits. This ultimately brought up a great deal

[32] "Best Face Forward." *Dance Spirit Magazine*, March 6, 2008.

of conflict. Some dancers had moments where they felt as though they absolutely were experiencing the emotion that their face expressed. They had difficulty reconciling the duality between what is observed and what is experienced. On the one hand they could see the arbitrary nature of their expression on video and the difficulty they were having in sensing the nuanced differences in the moment of movement, but on the other hand they felt as though the way I was asking them to express created a certain type of aesthetic and since it was not what felt "natural" to them at the time it felt forced upon them and therefore *also* in conflict with the rules. This tension became clarifying, though, as the dancers used it as a tool to separate the physical actions which they were performing from the associated emotions they might be inadvertently bringing to the movement. The work then became a practice in identifying intention, original as well as changing, and navigating that through to action.

This brought me to the idea of task and function. I began to ask myself in setting the work and the dancers in performing the work, what is each action or each section trying to accomplish and what is needed to reach or support that? This also demanded the dancers to consider the degree of effort needed by them to complete the task at hand. By shifting the focus of the work to completion of movement intention based on the needs of the moment, the dancers' expression also began to surface as needed. It freed the dancers from the desire to refine and embellish in moments when it was not needed by the task. Just by using the words task and function, the dancers were able to let go of feeling the need to *make* movements pretty or expressive, and just commit to what was needed or intended.

The ideas of "accomplishing" task, function, or intention eventually brought up another conflict. A couple of the dancers became fixated on the *accomplishment* of these things as the need to achieve particular goals, and if such things were not achieved the way they initially set out to do they became aggressive and considered it a failure. While performing the work in rehearsals they would try to use their movement choices to will or push the others into their perceived "correct" sequence of events within a specific time frame to ensure "success". When we would discuss sections after rehearsing them, dancers would accuse each other of not caring about or being invested in the success of the work. A hierarchy emerged. This called for an immediate need to revisit the original intention of the piece, as well as the rules for engagement. It became apparent that the conflict was not a question of straying from intentionality, but rather the individual dancers internally wrestling with their own difficulties in fully embracing this manner of working. Personal patterns, priorities, and values came directly into focus, and finally had to be reconciled in relation to the development of the piece.

The need for control became front and center. The dancers realized and verbalized that they were struggling with not having all of the details – what something *should* look like, how something *should* happen, what the end result *should* be. They wanted to know as much as possible about every aspect of the piece in order to intellectualize, analyze, translate, and control result – in order to feel the security and assuredness of "doing it right". I explained to them that the problem with that is nothing new happens. If we know or predetermine what is going to happen, then there is no spontaneous discovery. As was my personal hope in creating *ambiguous gaps*, I needed

to open myself to the process of finding something that I had never known or done before.

Just as I had struggled prior to beginning this project, the dancers were now struggling. Through this shared struggle I awoke to the notion that there is a difference between something that is difficult and something that is beyond my current ability to see or grasp – though they may feel similar, the former is certainty while the latter is possibility. I came to the resolve that if I could anticipate the outcome of something and direct my path, then I felt no sense in following through because I had already been down that road. With the creation of *ambiguous gaps,* I dove headlong into something that I could not yet see, and so the purpose of this work was not to baby step into safe places in which I was already familiar, but rather to push myself into places I could barely fathom. As the dancers came to know these feelings as I did, they began to find their places within the whole of the piece.

Emergence of the Work

As the cast and I continued to work, I became struck by the arbitrary nature of "beginning" and "ending". These theoretical constructs for the sake of organization felt counter to my intentions of the piece, so I began to introduce the idea of "ongoingness." Initially, this started with a bleeding together of performer preparation and the opening section of the work, as well as the final section of the work and performer recovery. Later, it also resulted in a merging of the eight sections of the piece so that there were no points of starting and stopping, but rather a continuous ebb and flow of energy.

ambiguous gaps is approximately a forty to forty-five minute length work consisting of eight indistinct sections which flow from one to the next. Within it are five group sections, two of which were set through improvisation, two which are structured improvisations, and one which is choreographed but allows for improvisational choices within the choreography by the dancers. Additionally, the work also contains one structured improvisational duet, one partially choreographed and partially improvised trio, and one fully improvised solo.

Section 1: Ritual

Borrowing from the early years of contact improvisation in performance as Novack described, I wanted things to be happening with the performers in the space "when the audience entered so that the beginning of the performance was indefinite."[33] Initially, I experimented with the musician warming up and the lighting designer cuing up the light board and adjusting lights as needed, while the dancers acclimated to the space as the audience entered. The intention was for the performers to adjust, release any excess tension or nerves, and gradually move into the bulk of the work. However, my initial attempt at creating an improvisational structure to set this up broke one of my rules and simply did not work.

In that first version, I asked the dancers to begin by moving through the space while verbally saying what they saw. Then they were to allow that to develop into

[33] Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 122.

movement response to what they were seeing and saying, followed by stream of consciousness speaking and allowing for the thoughts and sensations that came to them to be released back out into the space through verbal and non-verbal language. Theoretically, this seemed like a great idea, however, after the first three or four times we tried it, it became completely forced. I realized I was holding on too tightly to *trying* to make something happen in a specific way.

Once I abandoned the first structure, I decided this section would become a personal ritual – whatever each performer needed to do to connect with themselves, connect with the space, connect with the audience, and connect with each other. This included both Everett and Brusberg as well as the dancers. This restructuring of the section resulted in something that was far more natural and personal, and closely resembled musicians warming up and preparing to play in an intimate venue. During this section, Brusberg kept the house lights up, illuminating the entire space, and allowing for everyone to see and be seen.

Section 2: Posturing

Without any fanfare or introduction, we shifted into "section two", which realistically was the "beginning" of the "performance". The section began simply by the agreement with each other that we were ready. I created this section through improvisation and then "set" the improvised movement as "choreography", and it is primarily active and reactive physical contact. To begin creating the section, I told the dancers that they were all going to place their hands on the same object. Together they were going to move that object through the space however they chose, but all while

maintaining as close of a physical relationship with it as possible. The "object" in question, was me.

By moving with this idea improvisationally, I would work with the dancers through a few moments, remembering each choice made, and then repeating it to re-find pathway and the points of connection that created cause and effect. As such, the section grew through a process of layering, resulting in a growing energy and vigor that cut through the space in diagonal pathways. The group of all five dancers found moments of hovering closely to the audience, moments of intimacy, and moments of near violence within the group.

As the section pushed and pulled, restrained and caressed, the lighting gradually softened from the full houselights of section one. The light from the overhead scoops shone through the catwalks creating contrast of shadow and texture on the floor as well as everyone in the space. Everett sat on the edge of the stage with his acoustic guitar using its resonance to push, subdue, and respond to the energetic shifts of the dancers.

Section 3: Void

In the final moments of section two, the dancers spun me, the "object", out into the space, releasing contact and setting me free. At that point, I stepped out of the empty space in the center of the room and sat on the stairs of the audience risers. This was their cue to begin section three, where they would recreate each cause and effect task of section two, except without the "object". Their task was then to negotiate the void that this absence created, while remaining as close to their original movement intentions as possible. This section was also found through improvisation and then set

as choreography, finding that as physical relationships changed the motivation for the movement intention had to change as well, creating dynamic shift and new points of focus.

In this section, as Everett continued to respond on his acoustic guitar in conversation with the movement, he also found shifts in the quality and direction of the sound. The lights also continued to soften through this section as well until only the open floor space in the center of the room and everything within it began to glow. At this time, Brusberg stepped away from his lightboard, where he was witnessing the other performers until this point, and into the space with the dancers.

Section 4: Holding

Taking a single, lit wheeled Fresnel light, Brusberg stepped into the space as all dancers except two sat down among the audience. All other lights faded to black. To the sound of Everett's piercing and crying viola mixed with syncopated, synthesized beats, Brusberg held the light invasively close to the duet on stage. He confined them with the light as one dancer playfully and forcefully embraced the other. As the confined dancer tried to break free, taking up more space but continuously being recaptured by the other, Brusberg trailed them, keeping the light as closely and intently focused as possible until the struggle between the two dancers grew so big that he had no choice but to step away.

The creation of this section was an entirely new experience for me. Since I am typically in work as I am setting it, embodying the movement whether it is choreography or an improvisational structure, I made a choice to try something

different this time. To create section four, I consciously chose to remain on the outside and verbally direct the dancers through it. To this day I still do not know the feeling of being inside of it. To set the section, I remained on the periphery of the rehearsal space and offered the dancers cues for improvised interaction. My first cue was to ask one of the dancers to hold onto the other dancer. I then asked the held dancer to try to get out of the hold.

Over time, my verbal cues developed into specific parameters regarding the nature of the hold and how it might progress during the section from a firm confinement into an offering of accommodation and support. I also created movement goals for the held dancer, which was to try to fulfill in her own way a piece of phrase work that I had previously created. Ultimately, the two dancers were to find a give and take to hold the space for each other through use of the phrase work as improvisational vocabulary. Additionally, since the developments of the section were very specifically structured, but the entirety of it was wholly improvised, the quality of the relationship changed, sometimes drastically, from run to run.

Section 5: Chasing

As the preceding duet began to find a place of reciprocity through movement the other dancers reentered the space in their own time. Everett transitioned from his viola to his laptop where he began mixing beats and synthesized sound creating a musical landscape for movement possibility. Brusberg also entered the space with a single lit Fresnel in hand.

The entirety of this section was a structured improvisation. Using choreography that I had created, each dancer "disassembled" it to find within the movement a non-verbal language vocabulary for themselves. Utilizing this language, I created three structural parameters for the dancers – they had to be in or witnessing "conversation" with other performers, make physical contact with at least two other performers, and if/when the time felt appropriate, move in unison with some of the choreography for as long as they chose. This structure often involved moments of physically mimicking, mirroring, responding, seeing, and sensing each other through contact. Dancers often came into conversation with the sound and Brusberg with his Fresnel light as well, creating great dynamic shifts.

Regarding Brusberg in this section, it was the first time in the work that he was fully inside of the performance space with the dancers. He rolled, lifted, tilted, and lowered the Fresnel to illuminate and be in conversation with the other performers. Though he was not necessarily "dancing" he was part of the dance. For this section, Brusberg and I thought it would be interesting to push the possibilities of how Olsen describes the role of light in *The Place of Dance*. Olsen says,

> Because light creates a frame – a scene composed of what it illuminates – it manipulates where your attention goes. In theatrical performance the lighting designer creates a place in time as well as the pacing through which things occur. The choreographer and the lighting designer determine the architecture of the dance – how it unfolds in time and space… Lights can communicate, illuminate, evoke, support, and convey the focus of the piece. Lighting design can also challenge and thwart expectations – of the dancers, choreographers, or audience.[34]

[34] Andrea Olsen and Caryn McHose. *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 170.

Embracing the possibilities of what light can do and provide, Brusberg and I wanted to instigate the potential challenges Olsen names by maybe only lighting some of the dancers, or none of the dancers, or quickly changing the direction of the light based on Brusberg's choices in the moment.

Section 6: Cast

As section five dissolved, cued by two dancers making the choice to leave the space, the landscape of the space shifted. Brusberg brought his light to a stationary location within the space and positioned two other Fresnel lights within the space as well. These lights created three distinct pools on the floor. Everett transitioned to a melodic piano, contrasting that of the previous section's synthesized beats. The three remaining dancers each stepped into their own pool of light.

Using choreography, each dancer played with the contrast of shadow and light, remaining only in relationship with their individual light. While engaged in this play, Brusberg then began to manipulate the Fresnels and merge the pools, resulting in a spatial and relational shift between the dancers. As Brusberg continued to manipulate and shift the boundaries of the lit space, the interactions between the dancers layered together. Still investigating the contrast of light, shadow, and reaction to that which can be seen, the dancers weaved in and out of each other – never making contact, but like the dark space that filled the lit edges of a shadow, the movement always shifted in between. Progressively, the movement dissolved from choreography into purely improvised interaction.

As the section came to close through the improvised push and pull of creating and filling negative space, Brusberg seamlessly withdrew the Fresnels and flew in a scoop from the center of the ceiling overhead to create a single pool in the middle of the floor. Meanwhile, two of the dancers edged the third towards the center of the light and then simultaneously left her alone in the space.

Section 7: Reclaimed

In the light, to the sound of her own breath, the solo dancer began to move. Set only as a loose improvisational structure, the dancer was cued to simply listening to the inner impulse that called and follow it until it pulled her out of the light. When the lit space was broken, Everett could then choose when and how to speak through his electric guitar – often wailing. As the dancer moved through the unlit floor space, her new movement intention was to make energetic connection with the audience, however she chose to interpret that. Everett continued to carry on his own musical stream of consciousness and follow his inner impulse. The structure then dictated that at some point the dancer and Everett needed to move together, in whatever way they interpreted that idea. Each performance the interaction and convergence was strikingly different, but the final resolve was always the same – a simultaneous stillness of quiet and calm after the only completion of a musical chord progression within the entire work.

Section 8: Interstice

One by one, Brusberg and the other dancers then reentered the space, walking diagonal pathways at uneven intervals to make their way to a place on the periphery of

the open area at the edge of the audience. These walking pathways continued several times through new pathways, gaining speed, and gradually shrinking the diameter of the space, as Everett looped a chord from his electric guitar and Brusberg relit the Fresnel lights encircling the space.

For the first time in the work and initiated by group consensus, the dancers moved into sustained, choreographed synchronicity. Additionally, the dancers also had the freedom to drop into and out of the choreography whenever they chose, as well as hold as close to or far from specificity of choreography as they would like. Along the same lines, Everett played live piano to a preset guitar loop, making choices of when to drop into and out of relation with it.

The Fresnels remained unchanged, while the house lights along with the overhead scoop lights gradually came up, creating intensity throughout the space. One by one, the dancers, Brusberg, and Everett, completed their final thoughts, wrapped up what they were doing, and exited the space. As a cue to the audience that this might be "the end," the performers then reentered from all aisles and sides to take bows and then talk to friends, family, and colleagues to thank them for coming.

Chapter 4: The Process of Performance

Reaffirming the Practice

In stepping into technical rehearsals and performance, the cast and I felt so deeply prepared. We had encountered so many obstacles and unexpected elements during our rehearsal process, that we felt confident we had the tools to navigate whatever might happen in performance. We were so excited to finally, consistently have witnesses to what we were exploring, and eager to feel and negotiate the shift of energy that an audience brings. We also had fully come to terms with the fact that, as Olsen puts it, "during some performances, rare ones, the whole evening flows; but many times, only pieces of pieces attain their full glow."[35] We had accepted this, and we were ready.

After an enlivening two first runs of the work in technical rehearsals, filled with an array of new discoveries, paths, and connections because we were finally in the performance space with the design elements, the work began to feel bland. On the third night of technical rehearsal, the cast and I found ourselves coming out of the work feeling neither inspired nor disappointed. Though we were fulfilling the structures, remaining present, and working through things the way we set out to, that became the problem. Since we began this project, we had continued to develop the work each time we approached it – new layers were continually added, new risks were taken, and so new opportunities perpetually arose. All of that had suddenly stopped. We did not realize until then that "under pressure, work can either take a turn toward the

[35] Andrea Olsen and Caryn McHose, *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 181.

predictable or sustain invention. [That] what was a unique investigation can begin to look reprised – something that's been seen before."[36] It was as if transitioning into "performance" had created some sort of unspoken agreement between us that the development of the work would end and we would "show what we had."

Upon realizing this, the cast and I regrouped. We committed ourselves to the process of performance as just another step in the process of the development of the work. We consciously returned to making new choices and finding moments by new means within each run. We returned to post-run discussions, making note of new choices that were made and new opportunities we saw unfolding. The work reawakened, and so did we.

Feedback, Audience, & Meaning

The other shift that occurred upon moving into technical rehearsals was my final surrender to the idea of success, and it happened without any conscious effort. Somewhere within those final weeks of rehearsal I realized that I had accomplished what I intended- I had navigated my way through the gap, the unknown, what Nachmanovitch calls the "dead-zone." I knew, as with all art and all things, that this work would not be everyone's proverbial cup of tea – that it might be uncomfortable, boring, or abstract – but being well-liked was not the purpose of the work, and people's experience or meaning-making of it was outside of my control. That was their gap to navigate.

[36] Andrea Olsen and Caryn McHose, *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 177.

Those final two weeks of technical rehearsals in the performance space leading up to opening the work, were filled with audience feedback. It was the most feedback I received from people outside of the cast during the entire creative process. Whereas previously in my career receiving feedback often made me feel nervous and uneasy, accompanied by the compulsion to explain myself, I now found myself more open to it and comfortable with it than ever before. It was as if I had finally surrendered myself to the work, to the reality that I had and was offering all that I was able, as were all of the other performers and contributors – that we were remaining as true as we could to the intent of the piece, and beyond that we had no control, nor did we want it.

Specific feedback regarding the continued honing of the work became easy to filter – either it brought us closer to the intent of the experience, or it did not, and if it did not, I let it go. I readily accepted that I could not see or experience the work from all perspectives, which opened me up to being eager to know and understand the varying experiences of others. I was curious of what the piece elicited and why.

My favorite piece of feedback was shared with me second-hand by Christopher Brusberg. In talking with a fellow lighting designer who had seen the work several days before, he shared with Brusberg that he initially did not think he liked the piece, citing that it was too abstract, with no discernable story, too many things going on at one time, and not enough direction of where to look when. He followed up by saying then, several days later, he found himself continuously thinking about the work, about things that he had seen that did not register immediately, or choices that he had made about where to look, and what to visually engage with, and why. It was then that he realized the work had "gotten under his skin", made him think, and made him reconsider.

Chapter 5: The Process of Becoming

> If the choreographic process hasn't changed you, you are not finished. Innovative work opens something new. From initial impulse, through investigative states, to final reflection, development occurs… The creative challenge is to get to the bottom of things – of you.[37]

I am a different version of myself now than I was at the beginning of this. Through the process and practice of all that built and developed *ambiguous gaps,* I learned to surrender, to accept, to trust in myself, to stay open, and to follow what calls. This brought me to whole-heartedly embrace the idea that what something is can and does change in a moment, every moment. That sometimes it is within my control and sometimes it is not, but I must accept it for what it is and offer to it what I can. I realized that in each moment what I may have previously found or had, thought or felt, must be re-found, reinvested from where I am in the present because nothing ever stays the same.

In putting the process of navigation and negotiation on stage, I found my creative process. No longer are the days of "erecting a building from an exacting blueprint." I have now found that my creative process is a deeply intuitive calling, one that I must at many moments follow somewhat blindly as it shifts and changes based on the needs and intentions of the work at hand – peeling away the layers until I get a glimpse of what to uncover next, until I see small pieces take shape and those pieces begin to create a whole.

[37] Andrea Olsen and Caryn McHose, *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 84.

This discovery of creative process has also inspired a shift in my pedagogical methods. Though I have always felt that my role as a movement educator is not only to cultivate fully integrated, agile bodies and minds, but also to facilitate the discovery and development of each student's unique creative voice and personal process, my approach has now changed. Above all else, I now encourage the pursuit of curiosity, experimentation, and collaboration, presenting class material and ideas much like an improvisational structure of which students can choose to work within or test and break the boundaries. I now present technical theory and physical application not only as a construct for understanding specificity, but more importantly as a process through which creation can occur. Much like I found through developing *ambiguous gaps,* I want to empower students with the opportunity of play and choice in the hopes of manifesting personal identity and the tools for adaptation, resilience, and growth.

By releasing the "what" of action and creation I have found the "how," and I have realized that *how* I approach something, *how* I approach *life,* is far more meaningful to me than *what* I produce. This shift in value and focus is now allowing me to approach the creation of choreography differently. Though I previously often choreographed through improvisation, I also worked to clarify and set the movement on myself before sharing it with or teaching it to others. Now, I consider the entire evolutionary process from initial improvisation to figuring out what it is through movement play and negotiation to be an ongoing collaborative conversation between me and the other dancers/performers in the space. What it becomes is now of lesser importance to me than how we find it together, but I trust that committing to and investing in the how will manifest in the what.

Though I plan to continue to develop *ambiguous gaps*, potentially diving into sections and allowing them each to unfold and take shape as their own voice, I am not yet sure exactly where it will go. For now, the work lives in the moments in which it has existed, and when it is revived, it will live in a new way, in a new time, as it needs. However, what the work taught me, what it fortified in me, the ability to "face the gap between [my] half-intuited feelings and imaginings and capacity to know them and frame them" without fear or self-denial, has changed me both creatively and personally.[38] I now find creativity and joy inside of that gap. I have learned how to "revive the dead zone."[39]

I could not, however, have found any of this without the support and trust of my cast in this fledgling creation. Together, we navigated our way through many gaps, within the work and within our shared process. Even when building this work became most stressful and most uncertain, they still placed their trust in me and invested themselves in our shared space. Hendrix says despite the commonplace thought of our culture, "salvation is not an 'inside' job; it is the outcome of being nourished by others."[40] I could not have felt this more deeply than in the ten-month creation of *ambiguous gaps*. As one of my cast members said following a rehearsal improvisation where we had all left the floor except her, "I didn't know I was alone because I could still feel them with me."

[38] Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 154.
[39] Stephen Nachmanovitch, 154.
[40] Harville Hendrix Ph.D., *Getting the Love You Want* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 164.

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